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ABSTRACT

A study explored whether children from lower class families would approach early writing with less confidence than children from other social classes. Subjects, 233 kindergarten children in all, represented four public elementary schools in very different settings: (1) an all-black low income neighborhood in the central city; (2) a white middle class suburb; (3) a middle class black housing subdivision in a lower class white neighborhood; and (4) a lower income white area where black children are bused to school. Of the 223 children, 95 were black and 128 were white. Forty-seven were middle class, while 176 were lower class. Social class was determined by the percentage of youngsters receiving free or subsidized lunches. Literacy instruction in all the schools was a traditional reading program. For the study, each child participated in an individual writing session and was asked to write eight words and a sentence. A newly developed Confidence in Writing Scale was used to rate the children. Data analyses were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test. Results indicated that the middle class children were more confident in their ability to write than were the lower class children. Findings suggest that confidence in writing is related to social class differences rather than to race or sex. (A table of data is included.) (NKA)

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Social Class and Kindergarten Children's Confidence in Writing

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Social Class and

Kindergarten Children's Confidence in Writing

Social class is a determinant of both the quality and quantity of education offered to children (Anrig, 1985; Boykin, 1984; Forbes, 1985; Froe, 1972). According to Cardenas and First (1985), fewer resources are allocated to schools in poor neighborhoods than to schools in middle and upper class neighborhoods. They also suggest that teachers often have lower expectations of children in low income schools.

Read (1975) found that early writing is primarily done by middle class children of the educated professional class. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) suggest that scholastic learning begins on school entrance for lower class children while middle and upper class children continue their previous school-like learning.

With these findings in mind, we hypothesized that children from lower class families would approach early writing with less confidence than children from other classes. Through the years, self-confidence and self-esteem have been popular topics in the literature, but we could find no studies that referred to self-

confidence as it relates to early writing. Thus, our exploration of self-confidence and early writing fills a void in the research.

Method

The children in our study included both middle and lower class Caucasian and Black kindergartners in four public elementary schools. Each of the four schools is in a different type of neighborhood: (1) an all Black low income school in the central city; (2) a Caucasian middle class suburb; (3) a middle class Black housing subdivision in a lower class Caucasian neighborhood; and (4) a lower income Caucasian area where Black children are bused to the school. Of the 223 children involved in the study, 95 were Black and 128 were Caucasian. Forty-seven of the children were middle class; 176 were lower class. There were 100 females and 123 males. Social class was determined by the percentage of children on free or reduced lunch.

Literacy instruction in all four schools consists of a traditional readiness program. The programs include a heavy emphasis on sound-symbol relationships with few opportunities for the children to do personal writing.

We define confidence as a willingness to attempt writing words and sentences. We assigned a rating for each child's confidence in writing at the conclusion

of an individual writing session in which the child was asked to write eight words and a sentence. We developed the Confidence in Writing Scale which was reviewed for content validity by a panel of experts. After we initially tested the instrument with a sample of 100 children, we made the necessary revisions in the scale. Two raters established interrater reliability by observing the same children until agreement was reached (similar ranking attained). On the final data gathering, a single researcher, who had also been involved in the pilot testing process, rated the children. The scale ranged from a "very confident" rating of 5 to a "very insecure" rating of 1. Descriptive comments were recorded during the writing session to assist in the assignment of a rank.

Results

An ex-post facto design was used; descriptions of writing behaviors were rated on a 1-5 point scale. Thus, the level of measurement of the data was assumed to be ordinal. Data analyses were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test. Several comparisons were made: Lower class Blacks versus middle class Blacks, lower class Caucasians versus middle class Caucasians, and a lower class sample versus a middle class sample. The sample size of the lower class to middle class was disproportionate (4 to 1 in favor of the lower class).

Therefore, we chose a randomly selected sample from the lower class group so that the size of the comparison groups would be similar.

Results indicate that the middle class group was more confident in their ability to write ($p < .001$) than was the lower class group. Intra-class comparisons related to race and sex indicated no differences.

Insert Table 1 about here

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that, in this sample of children, confidence in writing is related to social class differences rather than to race or sex. The findings also suggest that the traditional literacy curriculum may be negatively influencing lower class children. The lower class child usually enters school with different types of literacy experiences than the middle class child and yet is given the same curriculum as children from middle class homes. Coupled with large class size, poorly funded schools, lower expectations by teachers and a curriculum geared to the "average" middle class child, lower class children are likely to experience failure in a curriculum that ignores what they know on school entrance. Children

are often asked to complete tasks which are far different than their experiential background. The failure experienced with the required curriculum likely causes confusion and influences children's confidence in their ability to write.

In light of these findings, curriculum planners need to study the literacy curriculum in low income schools. There is a need to develop an alternative approach to literacy for these children. The heavy emphasis on sound-symbol relationships and the copying of words are often meaningless activities and do nothing to promote confidence in these young learners from poor families whose prior experiences are so unlike those encountered in school. The literacy curriculum must take into account the strengths these children bring to school and build on their strengths so that they will have successful and meaningful learning experiences and become confident in their ability to write. Children who are confident in their ability to write are more likely to take the necessary risks to grow in their knowledge of written language and their ability to write.

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Table 1

Mann-Whitney U Test for All Groups

	Class		Race (Middle Class)		Race (Lower Class)	
Statistic	Middle	Lower	Caucasian	Black	Caucasian	Black
Number of Cases	47	47	29	18	77	99
R	24.60	70.40*	25.40	21.75	99.94	79.61
U	28.0		220.50		2931.00	
Z	-8.40		-1.04		-2.80	

*$p < .001$